# This Isn't It

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

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While Wacko Jacko was - by his own confession - Bad, the computer game based on his surreal anthology film, Moonwalker, is infinitely *more* Badererer. And I don't mean Bad in the *good* sense, it's just plain Bad-Bad. We could 'Blame It on the Boogie', but I don't think he worked for Emerald Software back in 1989.

In their defence, the Irish newbies commissioned by US Gold really had their work cut out. With such anarchic and preposterously varied source material from which to take inspiration, the possibilities were endless. Unfortunately, time *wasn't*; their minuscule Waterford-based team were granted just four months to design and produce a licensed tie-in title from scratch, and port it from the Amiga lead system to the Amstrad CPC, Atari ST, Commodore 64, MSX, PC and ZX Spectrum!

Incidentally, Emerald had nothing to do with the Arcade, SEGA Genesis, or SEGA Master System Moonwalker game released the following year. They were the work of SEGA and *Michael Jackson* himself. Honestly, really, genuinely. His name appears in the credits alongside 'game concept' and 'design by' so when the box proudly announces that the cartridge inside is "Michael Jackson's Moonwalker", it means it literally.

For years as a kid, I shared my bedroom with my hero, Michael Jackson. Not like *that*; his life-sized poster lived on my wall until it crumbled to dust, and it never went beyond a platonic relationship.

On that note, before getting underway I feel I should address the elephant (and *chimp*) in the room; child molestation. Having followed Michael's career exquisitely closely - going back way before he became a white, Caucasian woman in fact - I feel I'm a bit of an authority on the subject. With careful consideration after digesting all the allegations and

evidence levelled against him over the decades I'm absolutely certain that he was... quite a strange chap, who was either innocent or guilty. Definitely one of the two for sure. There's no denying that now the controversy has been settled once and for all.

Moonwalker - rather than a single, coherent movie - is a hodgepodge of extended music videos and musical theatre style screenplays written by and starring Michael Jackson, with no unifying narrative.

Alongside the late King of Pop, Warner Brothers' 92-minute medley also features Kellie Parker, Sean Lennon (yes, *John's* son), Brandon Quintin Adams, and Joe Pesci.

Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and even *Jesus Christ* make cameo appearances, though as they're assembled from stock footage they don't really count as cast members.

From a budget of $22 million, the 1988 presentation raked in $67 million at the box office, while the VHS release reached pole position in Billboard's Video Chart, refusing to budge for 22 weeks. What eventually put the kibosh on its seemingly never-ending run was the Motown music documentary,

'Michael Jackson: The Legend Continues'. A defeat that likely didn't cause Michael too many sleepless nights. Hmm, probably not the best choice of words to describe an insomniac, Propofol addict.

Moonwalker and Michael Jackson were clearly big business; U.S. Gold were in no doubt that if they could produce an accompanying home computer game worthy of the license, they'd have a sure-fire money-spinner on their single-gloved hands. What is it we say about 'best-laid plans'? With the deadline so tight it's hardly surprising to learn that the fruit of Emerald's labour turned out to be - in the words of U.S. Gold founder Geoff Brown - "an abysmal game".

Regardless, despite being panned by the critics, Moonwalker was a minor hit, at least in terms of units shifted. It reached no. 17 in the sales charts in June 1991 (source: C&VG), and no. 16 in June 1992 upon re-release as a budget title (source: The One). It's far more than it deserved.

> "The trouble is that whilst I am sure that Moonwalker will be a great success on the 8-bit formats, it's just not a 16-bit game. The third level, set in the Club 30s, is the best of the lot, as it's fairly addictive. In the other three, there's not really enough to do and the boredom factor creeps in. Highly polished and well-programmed but ultimately boring."
>
> **71% - Zero (January 1990)**
>
> "None of the four sections stands out particularly as being a great game, but all four are enjoyable. As a package, it will take some time to complete and provide a fair deal of entertainment. Its main problem is that there is no particular 'high' in gameplay terms. There is a lot of good things, but nothing great."

**68% - Amiga Format (January 1990)**

"Moonwalker starts with some impressive Bad samples but the tunes get repetitive after a while. Graphics start out badly with the poor maze games, and improve only to average for the other levels."

**65% - The Games Machine (January 1990)**

"My overall impression of the game is that it is limited. The first two sections are almost identical, while the last two follow very similar lines. This will go down well with fans of the film and the artist, but for the rest of us, it is a miss."

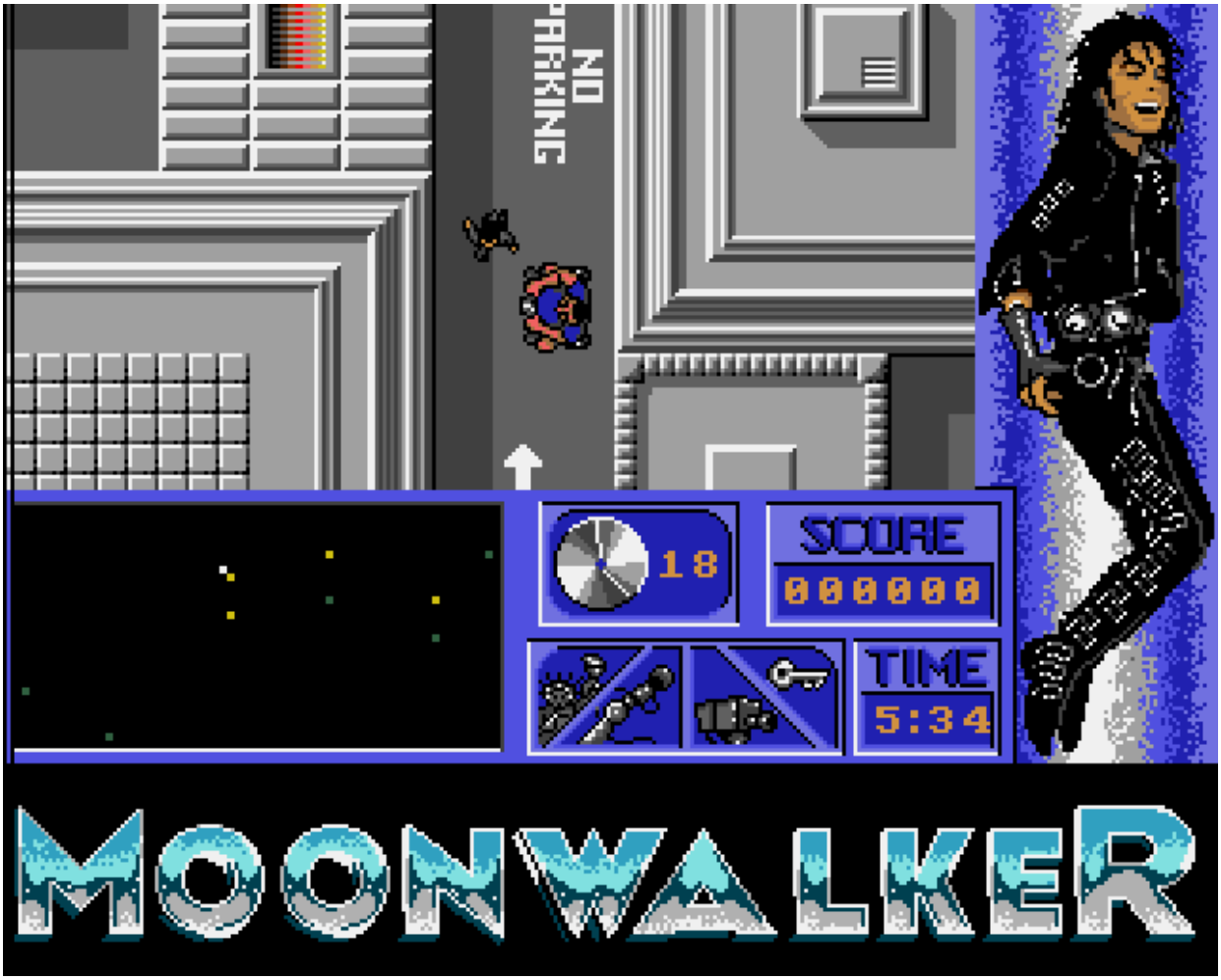
**63% - Commodore User (December 1989)**

"Good start-up and inter-level sequences. Mediocre maze-sections, average shoot- 'em-up sections. Good use of short samples to recreate songs, with good FX too. Maze-games off-putting, but slightly easier and hence more playable than the C64. Later levels less impressive than C64, but still quite playable."

**61% - Zzap! (January 1990)**

Mostly the game comprises a duo of very similar top-down mazes, beginning at the film studios seen in the Speed Demon segment of the movie, as directed by Will 'Claymation' Vinton.

The short musical play depicts Michael's comical efforts to escape a marauding swarm of unhinged fans armed with autograph books. These include Domino Pizza's mascot ('The Noid'), grandma and her son, a rabble of snap-happy Japanese tourists, the Biff brothers, and the horse-riding cowboys from Spielberg's movie shoot.




*Remind me, what is it we're playing again? I'm going to crop that from now on.*

> Steven Spielberg: (when Michael accidentally runs in on his set) Cut! You hairball, I'll never finish this movie! Who let him in? Isn't anybody in charge? Don't you know ANYTHING about show business?
>
> Michael: I'm sorry.
>
> Steven Spielberg: My producer is doing this to me, isn't he? I ask for a BAD guy and he gives me Michael Jackson? I can't take it anymore!

To slip away undercover Michael disguises himself as Spike the rabbit, donning a full body suit including prosthetic head found in a movie set costume room. They're easily fooled so Michael gives the game away by demonstrating some of his signature dance moves, for the thrill of the chase if you like.

To switch up a gear Michael steals a motorbike as a getaway vehicle and the Benny Hill style caper continues.

Heading out for the highway (looking for adventure and whatever comes his way!), the baying fans and paparazzi follow in hot pursuit showing no indication of abatement.

Attempting to shake them loose Michael yanks back the throttle, morphing into various celebrities, while his bike plays Snap, so to speak, as they hurtle onwards at breakneck pace, riding without 'due care and attention'.

In the game's re-interpretation, the level is somewhat less of a 'Thriller'. I did that deliberately because that's one of MJ's major hits. Clever or *what*?

To make your escape you must round up seven separate pieces of the rabbit suit, in the *right* order, directed by a flashing square in your scanner. As you gather together the components they appear one by one on the Jacko mannequin to the right of the playfield. Don't tell me you missed that, it's massive! Emerald redefined the phrase 'HUD creep' with Moonwalker. What, that's *not* a phrase? Well, it *should* be. This tip-toeing graphic is almost identical in all the home computer ports except for the C64 edition, where it's replaced with a picture of MJ lying down beneath the play area. Your guess is as good as mine.

If you don't collect the parts in the order indicated by the blinking map, they are completely inaccessible to Michael. You could tap dance on top of the Spike head for instance and *still* not attempt to pick it up. You know what that means, don't you? Lots and lots of mind-numbing, fruitless backtracking, which isn't remotely alleviated by being transported back to the start of the level whenever you

croak. Well, he was always more of a crotch-grabbing yelper really. Eee-heee, ooww. Nevermind Annie, Michael certainly wasn't 'OK', even *before* the flaming hair Pepsi incident.

Once Spike has been constructed - *resuscitated* you might say - you can begin to scour the compound for the keys to your ride. Note how your suit is now a sentient entity in its own right? Eh, eh, hint, nudge. You haven't seen the movie, have you? Nevermind.

On your travels you'll also need to track down some more showbizzy paraphernalia; a camera, microphone and statue of liberty of all things (see MJ's reinterpretation on the cover of his *His*tory album!). A bizarre choice seeing as the statue Michael stumbles across in the movie is only ever used to hide behind. It doesn't serve any purpose other than to come to life and deliver the quip, "Land of the free, home of the weird".

As you attempt to amass souvenirs, your fans fixate on simultaneously relieving you of them. Your platinum discs to be exact - these serve as a life counter, and you get 20 of them to begin with.

It's possible to run for short periods by holding down the fire button, though your strength is best conserved for times when you're backed into a corner and need to make a sharp exit. Some enemies e.g. the cowboys are faster than Michael when walking so this is often critical to your survival.

Whenever we *do* make a break for it I'm reminded of the first top-down GTA game that kick-started our descent into delinquency in 1997. Ramping up the deja vu, Moonwalker even includes the grand theft element, to a degree.

*Running* with the six degrees of separation theme, MJ's tracks 'Wanna Be Starting Something' and 'Billie Jean' both feature on radio stations transmitted in GTA: Vice City. Sales of the

game were temporarily halted for licensing reasons as a result.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles released in 1989 also shares an uncanny resemblance where the maze sections are concerned. But, *but*, get *this*! Steve Barron, the director of the first TMNT movie, also directed Michael Jackson's Billie Jean video, entangling the two brands further.

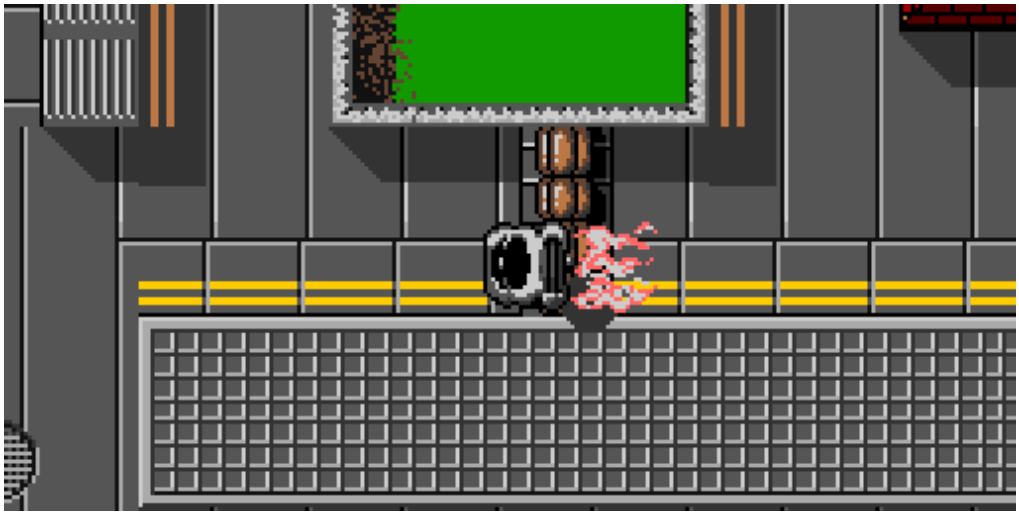
And if you're expecting me to string all this together in some meaningful way, you'll have a very long wait. I just enjoy trivia, and thinking aloud. Sorry.

In level 2 - aka 'Michaelsville', substituting for the movie's street scenes - Orbs are now the target treasure. Locate enough of them and you transform into the Lancia Stratos sports car seen in the Smooth Criminal segment of the trailer, I mean puff piece, er, I mean movie. During the anthology's pinnacle piece, this is Michael's means of escape having wished upon a shooting star when cornered in a dingy alleyway by the henchmen sent by drug baron Frankie Lideo

aka Mr Big. Lideo is the baddie on and off screen, being an anagram of DiLeo (Michael Jackson's former manager who is also a Frank).

> Mr. Big: My name is gonna be in the history books. And they better spell my name right! L-I-D-E-O. So simple. Frankie LiDeo! Very easy!

In the game, the car is deployed to jump several otherwise impassable barriers leading to the next areas on the map. You only have ten seconds to pull this off before it morphs back into bike mode, and you have to begin collecting orbs all over again. And that's as much fun as having a hair transplant and nose reconstruction surgery.



Before transforming into a jet ski, drugs are introduced into the scenario, making Moonwalker even more GTA-ish. Rather than delivering the class A substances for cash, our aim is to destroy them by running over the packets left out for the kiddies by Mr Big, played by Joe Pesci in the movie. I thought this was a point worth emphasising because once you get in character it won't be your natural inclination to *dispose* of pernicious drugs.

18
SCORE
042600
TIME
2:53
ORBS

19
SCORE
026100
TIME
2:39
ORBS

Michael: Why are you doing this? Stop it!

Mr. Big: You wanna know why I'm doing this, do you? I just wanna get everybody high, Man. You know, some good drugs. That's all.

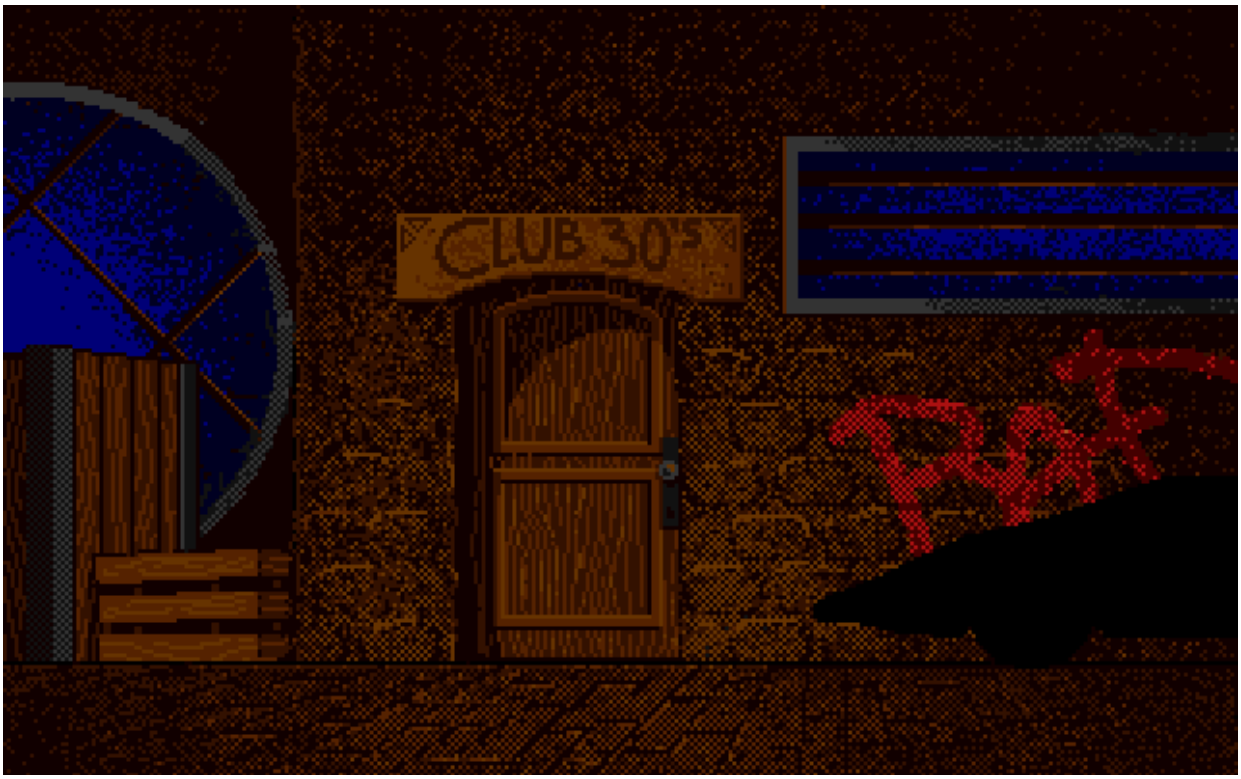
Michael: Do it and you're dead.

Mr. Big: Let's give her a shot of this.

Mr. Big: I want every kid in this whole world to take drugs because of me. Because of ME. I want everybody to know. Everybody.

Level three takes place in the Club '30s lounge, again extracted from the Smooth Criminal segment. Stepping

inside the Godfather inspired nightclub, Michael is greeted by a troupe of zuit-suited swing dancers and joins them for an impromptu stage show number wearing his trademark white suit and fedora as a tribute to Fred Astaire.

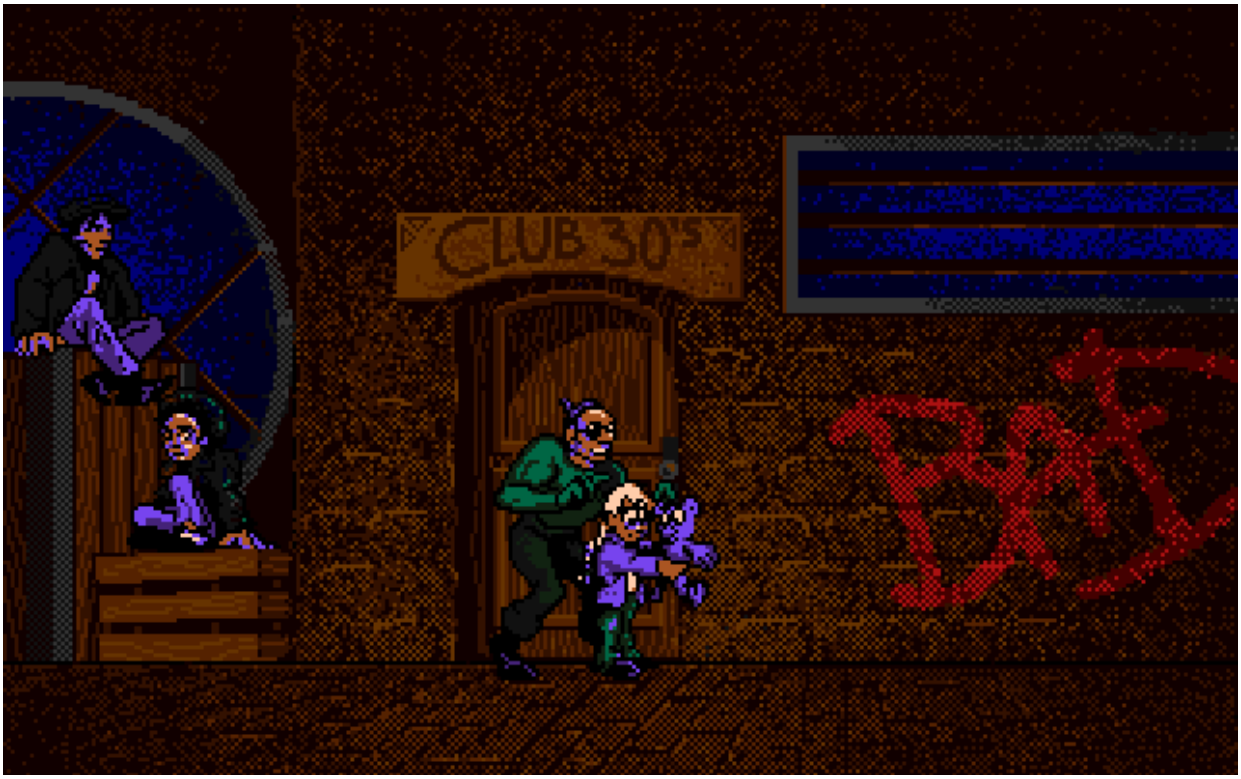


Towards the denouement of Smooth Criminal as MJ enquires about the state of Annie's health for the millionth time while demonstrating his patented, gravity-defying lean, Mr Big makes an explosive entrance and sets about peppering the venue with automatic weapon fire.

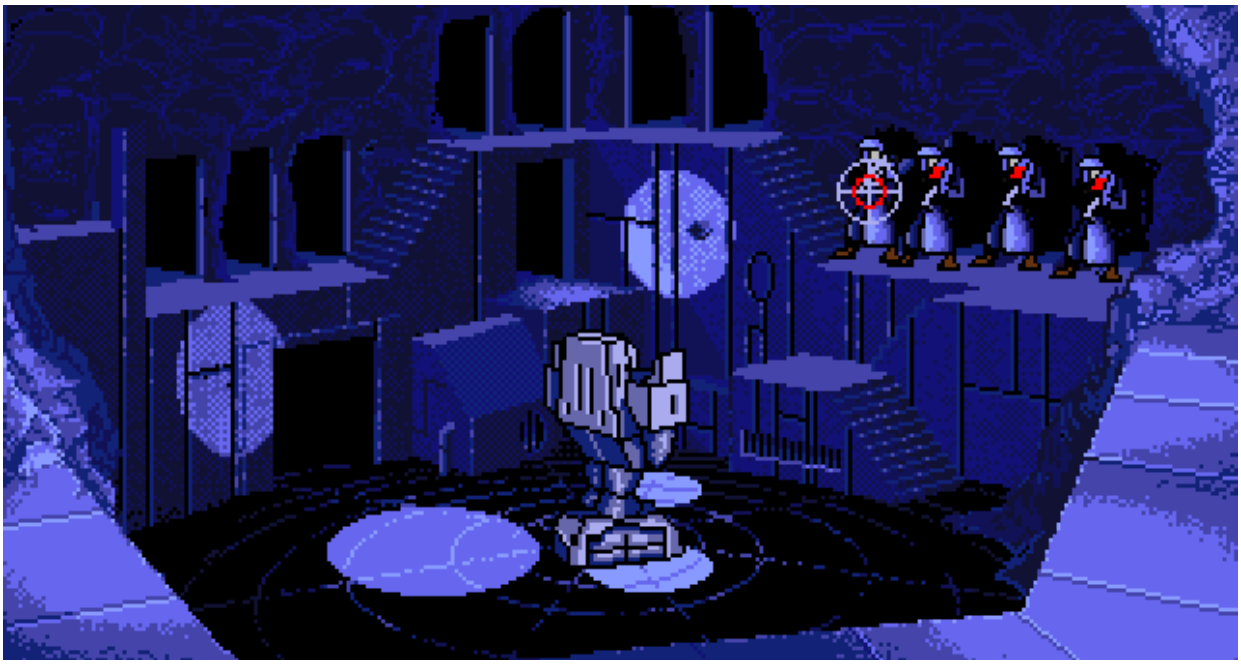
Amidst the melee, he kidnaps Katie, one of the homeless children Michael tries to help, and threatens to inject her with noxious narcotics.

This stage is a (third-person) Operation Wolf style mini-game. You must first race across the club's dance floor unarmed and vulnerable to find a gun and ammo while Mr Big's storm troopers take pot-shots at you from a multitude of vantage points. Once tooled up it's your turn to return the favour, paying special attention to not shooting the kids peering through the windows. Kids and bullets don't mix apparently.

As in the movie, we leave the club to pursue Mr Big to his underground lair determined to rescue Katie and thwart his nefarious scheme to get the world's kids hooked on drugs.

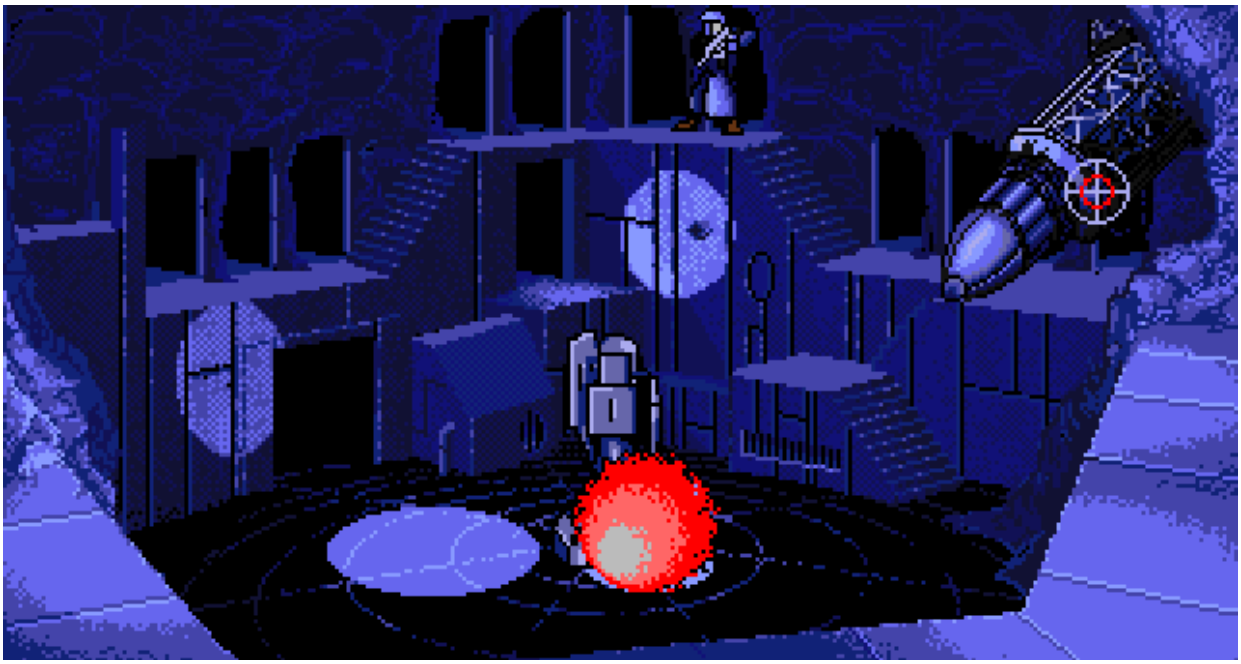



Entering 'The Arena' another falling star gives Michael the opportunity to wish to become a monster mech to blitz the mob. Funny how whenever we're outnumbered and up the creek, magic, fate, karma, god or whatever steps in to offer a helping hand. I really hope no weedy kids picked a fight with the school bully and looked to the skies for backup on the strength of this promise.



Finally, we morph into a spaceship - that could have been plucked straight out of Star Wars - to finish off Mr Big as he retaliates from behind the sights of a mountain-embedded energy cannon.

From a central position we must swivel around to target our nemesis and obliterate the jumped up little pipsqueak and his tarantula pet army. Actually I made up that last bit; they're a visual allusion to Mr Big's widening dominion over his playground in the movie. Not so much in Emerald's conversion.



Mission accomplished, we save the kids, all of them, the entire population of the world's kids. Because we're Michael

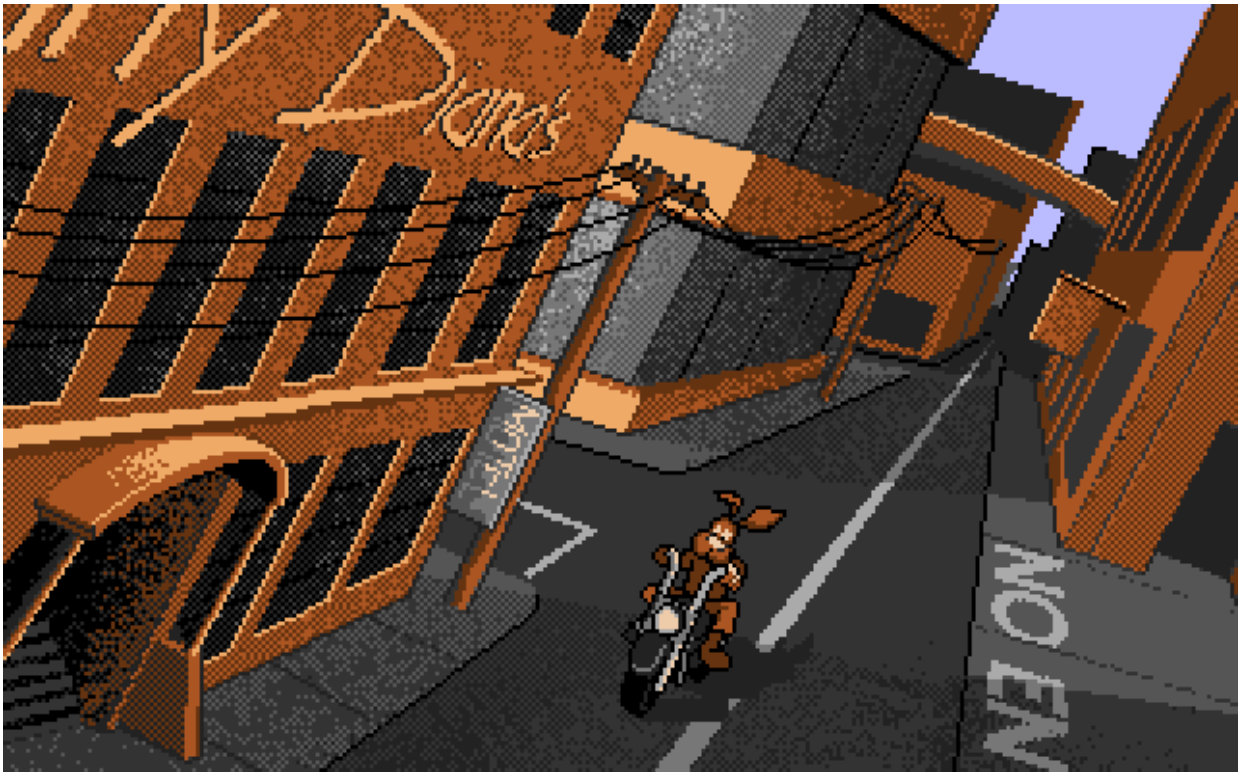
Jackson and Messiah-ing comes naturally to us. Unless that dratted Jarvis Cocker sticks his backside in the works and stymies our philanthropic Samaritanism.

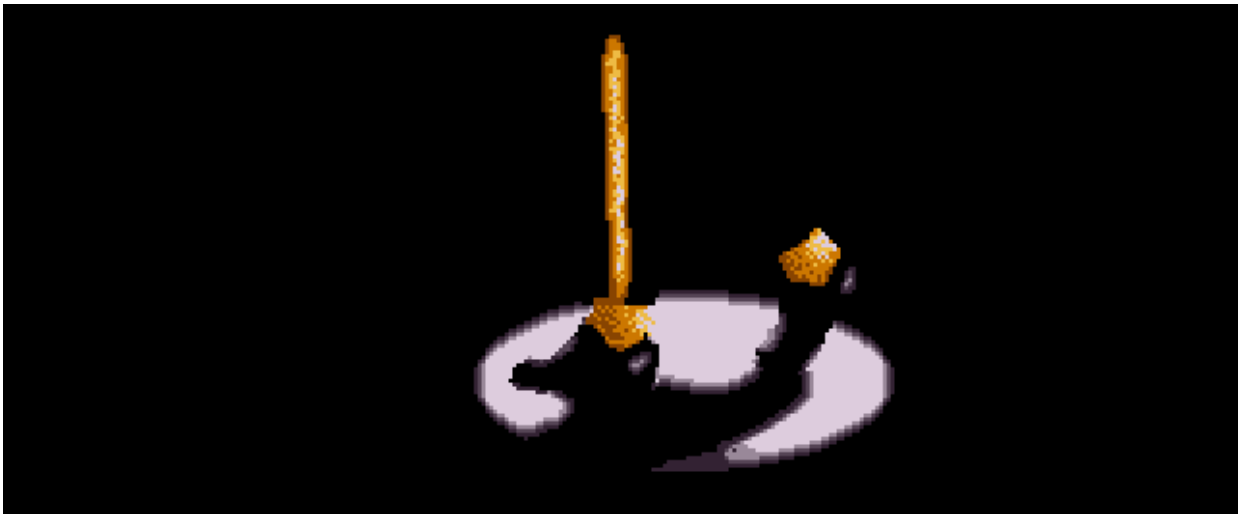
Sing it brother, "A B C, It's easy as 1 2 3, As simple as do re mi". No, you carry on. "Don't stop 'til you get enough". OK, that's plenty, "just beat it".

If it hadn't been for the imposing Moonwalker logo permanently limpeted to the bottom of the screen you'd be forgiven for thinking someone had swapped the game for a half decent one while you were preoccupied with blinking. If Emerald had cut out all the tedious maze-trudging that most

people never persevere with long enough to reach the main course, Moonwalker could have been a much better, albeit far shorter prospect.

It's a shame that drags down the presentation of the rest of the game because the inter-level animations and stills are extremely well-crafted thanks to talented Heimdall, Lil Divil, and Tomb Raider artist, Jerr O'Carroll. Cogently evoking the cartoony, zany tone of the movie I imagine they're the one aspect Michael would have approved of.





Music too shows great promise; several of Michael's best-loved early classics have been translated note for note. What scuppers the ambience is realising that they all loop three seconds in, repeating incessantly until you change levels. What's *that* about? Memory constraints is always the answer of course, except Moonwalker isn't a remotely demanding game and that looming perennial HUD must have made some sizeable compensations in the resource department.

Plus, the best counter-argument of all; Turrican exists! An almost full screen, silky smooth game that came on a single disk (in contrast to Moonwalker's *two*), chock full of some of the most sublime music ever filtered through *any* computer.

Sorry, I couldn't think of a *licensed* game example to make the comparison more relevant. These generally skimp on the OST, often only adopting the title tune if we're lucky. Not that this lets Moonwalker off the hook for a second - this marked an embarrassing new low at the time.

We're led to believe Michael's minders would accept nothing less than perfection from any officially licensed merchandise, making Moonwalker the game a bit of an anomaly. That is if it hadn't been for U.S. Gold project manager, Mike Wilding,

charging through a glass door and turning up to the LA green light meeting looking like bloody roadkill!